

Omnipotence Michael Lacewing

Omnipotence means ‘all-powerful’. However, saying more than this without falling into either logical contradiction or allowing limitations that seem inappropriate to God is very difficult. The problem becomes even more taxing when one tries to combine omnipotence with other attributes that have been traditionally ascribed to God.

Definitions

The first issue is what the definition of omnipotence is. There are, roughly, three camps of reply: that omnipotence should be understood in terms of the power to perform certain tasks; in terms of the power to bring about states of affairs; and in terms of power over other things. Some of the distinctions are quite technical, but each provides a different take on the problems that arise.

The most obvious definition of omnipotence is ‘the power to do anything’. But ‘anything’ is vague: does it include the logically impossible? For instance, could God alter the truths of mathematics, and make $2 + 2 = 5$? Could God create a married bachelor? Almost all philosophers have restricted ‘anything’ to ‘anything that is logically possible’. Part of the reasoning here is that what is logically impossible is not anything at all; the sequence of words describes nothing at all. So if God can’t do the logically impossible, there is still nothing that God can’t do. So it is no limit on omnipotence. But further reflection suggests that there are logically possible acts that God can’t perform. Can God go jogging? I can – which shows it is a logically possible act. More problematically, I can freely choose to act in a certain way. Can God bring it about that I choose to act in that way?

So we might revise the definition of God’s omnipotence to ‘the power to do whatever it is possible for God to do’. But this is too weak. A being that is clearly not omnipotent would still have the power to do everything it could do! Unless we know what it ought to be possible for God to do, the definition doesn’t secure what we would want to call ‘omnipotence’. A better definition is that omnipotence is ‘the power to do whatever it is possible for a perfect being (or the greatest possible being) to do’. This is, in an important sense, ‘perfect’ power.

There is still a question of how this is to be understood. One interpretation is ‘maximal power’ – it is not possible for any being to have more power overall than an omnipotent being. This allows that there are things I can do that God can’t (go jogging, make my choices); but overall, no one has more power than God. However, this is clearly a retreat from the idea of God having all power(s) to the idea that God has power ‘more than which it is not possible to possess’.

This definition raises several issues. First, there are two possible explanations for why it is not possible to possess greater power than God. The first is that God possesses every power it is logically possible to possess (a logically possible power is one whose exercise doesn’t involve logical contradiction – see examples below). The second is that although God doesn’t possess all logically possible powers, the combination of powers he possesses could not be increased to give greater power. This returns us to the weaker notion of maximal power, the idea being that the possession of one power rules out the possession of another power. The possession of each power on its own is logically possible, but their possession is not compossible. The power to go jogging is clearly logically possible, as I have it; but perhaps it is not possible to have this power

and the power to create time and space *ex nihilo*. Any being that had the latter power would not be a temporal-spatial being, so might lack some of the powers of temporal-spatial beings.

Second, in defence of the definition of omnipotence as the possession of every logically possible power, we may raise the question how we should identify and individuate powers. Is the power to go jogging really a distinct power? Surely not; it is a combination of free will and the power to move my body in accordance with that free will, but subject to laws of nature. In that case, we might argue that this is not a power God lacks. God has free will and God can move bodies, including my body, in accordance with his will. But God has greater power than me, in this regard, because God can move bodies without regard to the laws of nature. So there is no logically possible power I have that God lacks.

An alternative conception of power understands omnipotence as the power to bring about any possible states of affairs. As remarked at the outset, we may immediately rule out the impossible: if an omnipotent being has the power to bring about an impossible state of affairs (e.g. a round square), then an impossible state would be possible, which is a contradiction. However, as we'll see below, this definition will need significant qualification.

A final definition, after considering the paradoxes that follow in the next section, concludes that attempting to specify omnipotence as a logically possible attribute simply doesn't work. We should, instead, understand its attribution to God as a sign of piety, rather than something literally true. In this sense, omnipotence simply means that God has power over everything that exists.

Limits to omnipotence

Truths of logic and mathematics

We have already discussed whether God could alter these. Some pious philosophers have wanted to say yes – logic is no limit on God's power. Unfortunately, even if this were true, there is simply no way we could meaningfully say this. The limits of the logically possible are not limitations at all; any description of a logically impossible state of affairs or power is, at least in our formulation of it, not a description at all.

Stone paradox

Perhaps the most famous challenge to the logical consistency of the very idea of omnipotence is the stone paradox. Can God create a stone so heavy that he can't lift it? If he can, then he will not be able to lift the stone. But otherwise, he can't create such a stone. Either way, it seems, there is something God cannot do. Whether one understands omnipotence in terms of possible powers, or the power to bring about possible states of affairs, the paradox can be solved, because it presupposes the possibility of something logically impossible. 'The power to create a stone an omnipotent being can't lift' is logically incoherent, so it's not a possible power. If God lacks it, God lacks no possible power. Again, 'the existence of a stone that cannot be lifted by an omnipotent being' is not a logically possible state of affairs. That God can't bring it about is no limitation. Alternatively, we may allow that God could create such a stone, but in that case, the stone is, *by definition*, impossible to lift (clearly it will not be the stone's *weight* that prevents its being lifted by God, so it must be some other, essential attribute). If God lacks the power to lift a stone it is logically impossible to lift, there is still no power God lacks. Lifting a stone it is impossible to lift is not a logically possible state of affairs.

Omnipotence, time and repeatability

Can God bring it about that the Nile river floods for the first time? This is obviously a description of a logically possible state of affairs; yet could God bring it about if the Nile has

already flooded at least once? If not, is this some limitation of his power? One response is to say that the state of affairs is different in each case, that we should include the context (has the Nile previously flooded?) in our description. In that case, 'the Nile river flooding for the first time having previously flooded' is not a possible state of affairs, but a contradiction in terms, so there is no threat to omnipotence. Another is to say the power to bring any event about for the first time after it has previously happened is not a logically possible power.

However, one could also approach the question from the perspective of God's eternity, understanding this 'being outside time'. In that case, while God can bring about states of affairs that happen in time, and at a time, it is unclear what is meant by talk of God's acting at a time. God does not act before or after anything else. Of course, this raises yet further puzzles about omnipotence – is the power to act at a time a power that God does not possess if God does not exist in time? One could argue that there is no power God lacks here, as he can still bring about events that occur at a time.

Further puzzles

Many further puzzles remain. Here are just a few.

1. Could God commit suicide? If God is a being that necessarily exists, then God cannot cease to exist. God not existing is not a possible state of affairs. So we might say that God cannot commit suicide, but that is no limitation on his omnipotence.
2. Could God make himself non-omnipotent? If we again appeal to the essence of God (as omnipotent), we might argue that God cannot make himself not-God, but this is only because God not being God is logically impossible. But there is a general difficulty with appealing to 'essence'. We might argue that a tiger cannot be an antelope; but does this mean that God could not turn a tiger into an antelope? It seems wrong to think of an omnipotent being hemmed in by the very essences he created! Well, presumably God could change the matter of an antelope into that of a tiger; but even God couldn't turn the antelope into a tiger so that it was still an antelope (and a tiger) at the same time! Neither could God turn me into you (so that I was me but somehow now you). But this argument feels unsecure.
3. Could God bring it about that I freely decide to take up jogging? God could, presumably, cause the decision, but then – it is intuitive to suppose – I wouldn't have freely decided. The question here is whether a free decision can be 'brought about', or whether this is logically impossible. Of course, if it is caused, then it can't be free (we may suppose). But consider this: 'if I were to be offered a pay rise, I would freely accept it'. If this is true, there is a way you can bring about my decision to accept a pay rise, which is to bring about that I am offered one. If this type of sentence can be true 'if it were to happen that X, I would freely decide to Y', then God can bring about my free choices. But can these sentences ever be true (is my decision really free if it is true that I *would*, rather than I *probably would* or *might*)? If they can't, then does God lack the power to bring about my free choices? Or should we say that bringing about another agent's free choices is logically impossible?

Omnipotence and evil

Can God commit evil?

We have noted in passing the problems that some of God's attributes raise for omnipotence. If God is not material, can he go jogging? If God is eternal, can he act in time? A further puzzle is whether God can commit evil. At this point the difficulty seems to be that God's omnipotence conflicts with his will. If God is all-good, then God cannot commit evil. But is this a lack of power? 'I could never do that' we sometimes say, faced with the option of something horrendous. We couldn't not because we lack the power, but because we don't will it, or can't bring ourselves to will it. Philosophers have debated whether this is a limitation on free choice; does free choice

mean being able to will anything it, or is this simply a complete lack of character? Whatever the case for us, what does it mean for God not to be able will something due to the character of his will? Is God 'morally incapable' of doing evil? Is this a lack of a power, or is God's will being different a logically impossible state of affairs? But then how is God's will free if it is *logically* impossible for it to be different?

Three possible solutions:

- 1) There is a distinction between powers and acts (or character) of will. God has the power to commit evil, but simply chooses not to.
- 2) There is no distinct 'power to commit evil', because 'evil' doesn't name a distinct act. To commit evil, God would have to do something, e.g. hurt someone unjustifiably. God has all the powers to bring this about – there is no power he lacks to do whatever the evil act would be – but chooses not to act in that way.
- 3) There is no distinct 'power to commit evil', because evil is not a 'something', but an absence of good. Asking whether God can commit evil is like asking whether God can fail. But being able to fail is not a power (failing deliberately, of course, is a type of success, and so not failing). There is no 'power to commit evil' as committing evil is the result of the lack of power to do good, just as the failing demonstrates the lack of power to succeed. As God does not lack the power to do good, God cannot commit evil.

The problem of evil

Perhaps the most famous conflict is raised by the 'problem of evil'. It seems the following claims can't all be true: 1) Evil exists; 2) God is omnipotent; and 3) God is all-good. Because surely if (2) and (3) were true, God would eradicate evil. There are a variety of solutions offered to the problem, enough for a whole other handout.